

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's portion *VaEschanan*, the Torah repeats the Ten Commandments. Being that the Ten Commandments are the foundation of Jewish belief, let us focus in on one of the Ten Commandments in order to strengthen our observance of the fundamentals of our faith. We will concentrate our discussion this week on the Fifth Commandment: *Honor your Father and Mother*. The mitzvah of honoring parents is very dear to Hashem. As the commentator the Chinuch explains, if one is meticulous in honoring his parents, he will come to honor Hashem. (Mitzvah 33) Because, one who appreciates his parents who give him his material needs, will surely come to appreciate and honor the One who gives the Universe its spiritual needs. Because, if Hashem were to "pull the plug", the Universe would cease to exist. Thus the mitzvah of honoring one's parents is dear to Hashem because it is a mitzvah which leads to honoring the Master of the Universe.

Hashem therefore promises us that if we honor our parents, we will live long, as the verse states, *"You shall honor you father and mother as Hashem your G-d commanded you, in order that your days be lengthened..."* (Devorim 5:16) It is as if Hashem sees one who honors his parents and says, *"This person is worthwhile to keep alive for a while, because he appreciates the good that he receives."* Everyone loves to hear *"thank-you,"* while everyone despises an ingrate.

The following touching true story illustrates the extent to which one man was willing to go, in order to honor his parents. In the summer of 1994, Rabbi Stavsky, an orthodox rabbi in Columbus, Ohio, received a telephone call. The call led to events that were as remarkable and moving as any he had witnessed and participated in all his years in the rabbinate. The caller spoke in Yiddish and said, *"Rebbe, ich ruf eich mitt ah tzubrochin hartz (Rabbi, I am calling you with a broken heart.)"* The man explained that he had come to Ohio a year ago from Kiev, Ukraine. He had a painful personal problem and he wished to discuss it privately. Rabbi Stavsky invited him to come over at once. When Michel Darshevsky (not his real name) came to Rabbi Stavsky's office, he broke down as he explained the events of the past year. When he had first come to the Columbus area, he became a member of a local Reform temple. *"How then can I help you?"* asked Rabbi Stavsky. Michel's demeanor changed as he went on with his story. In 1941, Ukraine's German conquerors, with their Ukrainian henchmen (such as John Demjanjuk, may Hashem erase his memory), forced hundreds of Jews and gentile enemies of the state, to march to a field outside the city. Included among those were Jews Michel's parents. The German animals forced the helpless people to dig a huge mass grave and then lined them up and murdered them all. Michel had been able to run away from the group, and thus his life was spared. Knowing where his parents were buried, Michel went there regularly and recited the few Hebrew prayers he remembered. He was constantly plagued, though, that his parents were eternally buried together so disrespectfully and with gentiles.

When Michel realized that he would be coming to America, he went to the field in the Ukraine where his parents were buried and dug up some of the earth and put it in a jar. To him, this earth represented the remains of his beloved parents, and his dream was to honor their memory by burying it in a Jewish cemetery. One day, after having settled in the Columbus, Ohio area, he went to see the rabbi of a local Reform temple. Michel told him how his parents had been murdered, and that he now wanted to bury their symbolic remains in a Jewish cemetery. The rabbi assured him that it would be done. Soon after, Michel buried the earth-filled jar in the Reform temple's cemetery. A few weeks after the burial, Michel came to the Reform rabbi and told him that the time had come to put up the monument for his parents. Proudly, he told the rabbi that he had saved up money and had purchased a small monument with his parents' names engraved in Hebrew and in English. The Reform rabbi looked at Michel with astonishment. *"You can't have that monument put up in our cemetery,"* he said. *"That's not the way we do things here. Our cemetery allows only for a flat slab of marble, engraved with the name of the deceased, to be placed on top of the grave. Nothing more. We don't consider monuments aesthetic."*

Michel protested, saying that monuments were traditional and that was the way graves had been identified for generations. The rabbi explained that the expansive rolling hills of the cemetery were beautiful and that the monument would interrupt the gracious panorama of the terrain. He tried to make Michel understand that things were done differently in America; Ohio was not the Ukraine. Michel became angry and told the rabbi that if he couldn't put up the monument, he would dig up the jar and bury it somewhere else. The rabbi was not intimidated and told Michel that he could do so if he pleased but that the temple could not change its policy for one person, no matter how much he liked Michel. Michel had finished telling Rabbi Stavsky about his experiences with the Reform rabbi. The Russian Jew's eyes now swelled with tears as he looked worriedly at Rabbi Stavsky. *"Please, Rebbe,"* he said, *"do you have a Jewish cemetery where I could bury my jar with the earth of my parents and then put up the matzeivah (monument)?"* Rabbi Stavsky was overwhelmed. Tenderly he assured Michel that the burial and the placement of the monument would be arranged with dignity and respect. A few days later, Rabbi Stavsky and a minyan of 10 men went to his shul's cemetery. A small grave had been opened for Michel's jar. Before they placed the jar in the earth, Michel sat down and wrote in Yiddish on a piece of paper: *"Dearest Father and Mother, I will never forget you. Your loving son, Michel."* Michel put the slip of paper in the jar and the people gently buried the jar of earth. Rabbi Stavsky led everyone in the recitation of some chapters of Tehillim (Psalms) and he helped Michel say Kaddish. As they were driving home from the cemetery, Michel turned to Rabbi Stavsky and said in Yiddish with palpable relief, *"Tonight, I can sleep. For all these years, I was so concerned and troubled that my parents were not in kever Yisrael, a Jewish grave. But tonight I know they rest in peace."* (*Echoes of the Maggid*, Rabbi Pesach Krohn p.145) Hopefully, our parents will live long and healthy lives so that we can honor them in life at least as much as Michel honored his parents after their unfortunate deaths.

By being meticulous in the mitzvah of honoring our parents, we may be able to pay them back just a little for all that they have done for us in this world. Then we will come to a realization of how much we owe Hashem, for all that He does for us in this world and in the World to Come. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**